THE BOOK OF ESTHER: An Introduction

MYTH or HISTORY?

Unlike some books of the Hebrew Bible which deal with poetry, like Tehilim, or literature, like Job (according to some opinions) the story that Megillat Esther tells, is absolutely factual. Two elements distinguish a true story from a myth or a fiction: real stories are presented with references of time and space, while myths are not. Myths, we are told, happened "once upon a time", that is: in no specific time, and "in a far away kingdom", in no specific place. The story of Esther begins precisely by providing us these two coordinates: "This happened during the days of Achashverosh (Xerxes), the King that rules the Persian empire that stretches from India (in the East) to Ethiopia (in Africa)…. In the third year of his Kingdom" (that is 483 b.c.e. Xerxes reigned from 486-465 b.c.e).

MORDEKHAY, OFFICER OF THE KING

One of the elements that makes Megillat Esther unique is that it was not written by a King or a prophet in the sovereign Jewish State, like most of the Bible, but "under the auspices of a non-Jewish government." According to the text, Esther and Mordekhay, an official of Ahashverosh's government, wrote the Megillah at the time when Mordekhay was "working" for Ahashverosh. And for this precise reason some things which could be offensive to the sensibilities of the King or the Persian empire were not to be explicitly described. For example, the name of God is not mentioned in the entire book, because Persians had their own gods and religion. For that reason Jewish religious practices like "prayer to HaShem" is also omitted in the Megillah and the text uses instead "fasting". Obviously, the text cannot directly or indirectly criticize the Persian sovereign. When the text describes

Haman's plan to exterminate the Jewish people, the King appears to be uninformed about the identity of the victims and mislead by Haman's deception. Towards the end of the story the text subtly credits Ahashverosh with saving the Jews sealing the new decree. Without realizing that the story of Esther was written in this diplomatic way, and under these circumstances, it is not possible to understand these and other anomalies in a Jewish book.

ONE TEXT, TWO AUDIENCES

There is something else, related to this last point, that makes Megillat Esther a particularly sophisticated book. Megillat Esther is the only book, that I know of, that has been written simultaneously for two different audiences: on the one hand it had to be written to be approved by the scrupulous censorship of the Persian empire, and on the other hand, it had to be understood and appreciated by Jews from all over the world. But how is it possible to do this? How can a text reveal and hide at the same time? I will try to explain it very briefly. Hebrew terms have a more or less fixed semantics, like in any other language. But beyond the simple meaning of the words, Hebrew language is unique because it is intimately associated with the biblical text. And for any member of the Jewish people who knows (or should know) the biblical text by heart, words, especially infrequent words, and certain combinations or words, invite the reader to establish an immediate mental connection with other texts of the Hebrew Bible. Once the reference text is recognized, the words in the original text take on a new dimension. In this way the author creates two different messages in the same text: a simple one, for the reader who only understands Hebrew, and a more sophisticated one, addressed to the "linguistic community" who recognizes the Biblical text of reference.

WEALTH AND PRESTIGE

One example. The book of Esther begins with the description of

a mega-party that lasted for six months and seven days, that King Ahashverosh offered for the generals, ministers and officers of the Persian empire. After giving us the technical details of the party, the text explains the purpose of this great celebration (1: 4): Ahashverosh literally wanted to *"show-off his wealth and the glory of his kingdom ('osher kebod malkhuto)* in front of his guests. " Ironically, on the very last day of the party, the King gets drunk, loses his wisdom, and makes a fatal mistake: he summons his wife, Queen Vashti, to expose her and show her beauty before the men. Vashti refuses to come and this creates a great scandal that ends up being a great humiliation for king Ahashverosh. The King wanted to gain fame and prestige by showing off his great "wealth", but his lack of wisdom did not allow him to do so.

WISDOM AND PRESTIGE

The words "wealth and glory" used by the Megillah are easily identifiable by those who know the story of the coronation of another king, Solomon. When he is about to ascend to the throne, Solomon had a dream. In that dream God offers to fulfill any of his wishes. Solomon, who could have chosen wealth and glory, like all other kings, asks God to grant him "wisdom," to guide his people with righteousness and justice. God grants him wisdom, and in the end God also rewards him with "wealth and glory," 'osher vekhabod.

LESSON LEARNED!

The contrast between these two kings could not be clearer. The Megillah, through these two strategic little words "wealth and glory", points out that Solomon, who renounced wealth and honor and sought wisdom, in the end also obtained wealth and honor. On the other hand, Ahashverosh, who pursued wealth to gain glory and prestige, and did not seek wisdom, lost miserably his honor, and despite his great wealth he ended up making a fool of himself in front of his guests and the entire Kingdom.